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ABSTRACT

While some researchers question whether women can be more vulnerable to sexual assault because of personal characteristics and/or behavioral styles, typical research designs into this question draw on retrospective comparisons of victims and non-victims, making it difficult to determine whether the observed differences are causes, correlates, or consequences of the victimization experience. This paper reports on a longitudinal research design in which college women were surveyed upon entry into their first year of college and then again at the end of their first year. Findings show that victims of first-year college sexual assault were more depressed and tested lower on general psychological well-being scales than non-victims. Furthermore, victims reported greater use of intoxicants and a greater number of dating partners than non-victims. Victims appeared to have a more negative self-image than non-victims, seeing themselves as more compliant and less instrumental. They also were the most rejecting of traditional gender attitudes, whereas victims of verbal coercion and non-victims were the most accepting of such roles. When considering victims' backgrounds, it seems that childhood experiences with family violence and sexual abuse, combined with adolescent sexual victimization, made some women at greater risk than others for sexual victimization. (RJM)

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Sexual Revictimization: A Longitudinal Perspective

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Defining a Feminist Research Agenda

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A debate goes one as to whether all young women are at risk for sexual assault, or whether some women are uniquely vulnerable because of personal characteristics and/or behavioral styles. Part of this debate concerns the issue of victim-blaming, a concept soundly rejected by feminists. There is an inherent danger in studying the characteristics of victims, especially in the search of predictors. Some choose to avoid the topic because findings of differences between victims and non-victims can be used to blame victims--the usual rhetoric of "you shouldn't have been there; you shouldn't have worn that; you shouldn't have been drinking; you should have know better." However, it seems reasonable that women will benefit more by researchers facing the question head-on, and conducting rigorous research. Unfortunately, the typical design retrospectively compares victims and non-victims. With this design, it is difficult to determine whether the observed differences are causes, correlates, or consequences of the victimization experience. Longitudinal research conducted with a contextualist perspective is an ideal approach. However, even longitudinal designs can be

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plagued by the same interpretation problem as retrospective designs if initial and subsequent victimizations are not distinguished.

A longitudinal design permits the assessment of psychosocial and behavioral characteristics at time one and time two, as well as the occurrence of sexual victimization status between these two points in time. Since such a design is premised on the assumption that all women are "the same" at time one, an assumption that is not justifiable, the design needs elaboration. Built into it must be a consideration of experiences that occurred prior to the first assessment, and to control for pre-existing differences, especially earlier victimization experiences. If the victimized and non-victimized women do not differ at time one (prior to the victimization), after controlling for all pre-existing differences, but do differ on certain characteristics at time two following a victimization, then these characteristics may be considered outcomes rather than predictors/causes of the victimization.

The research reported today is based on this design. College women were surveyed twice, upon entry into the first year of college and at the end of the first year of college. The first survey included assessment of childhood experiences with family violence, childhood sexual experiences, and adolescent sexual victimization experiences. Additionally, a number of attitudinal, personality, and behavioral characteristics were assessed. At the second assessment, these same characteristics were assessed again, along with victimization experiences that

occurred during the intervening period (i.e., during the first year of college).

Our previous data have suggested that the single best predictor of first year college sexual assault is adolescent sexual assault, and that the best predictor of adolescent victimization was childhood victimization. This raises the possibility that the psychosocial and behavioral measures assessed at time one, while predictors of sexual assault during the next year, were themselves outcomes of earlier victimization. To control for this possibility analyses of covariance using time two measures as dependent variables and victimization status at time two (based on the Koss and Oros, 1982, categories) as the independent variable, with victimization status at time one (no prior history, only childhood victimization, only adolescent victimization, both childhood and adolescent victimization) and the time one measures of the dependent variables as covariates.

Results will be discussed for the categories of mental health, self-image, attitudes, interpersonal violence, and peer relationships.

For the mental health measures (based on Weit and Ware's Mental Health Index), after controlling for prior victimization and initial scores on each subscale, victims of first year college sexual assault were more depressed and lower on general psychological well-being than non-victims. Additionally, victims reported greater use of intoxicants than non-victims.

Additionally, victims appear to have a more negative self-image than non-victims, especially seeing themselves as more compliant and less instrumental.

With regard to acceptance of traditional gender role attitudes and chivalry, victims of rape and attempted rape were the most rejecting of traditional attitudes, whereas victims of verbal coercion and non-victims were the most accepting. For attitudes towards chivalry, victims of rape and women with no sexual experiences were most rejecting, and women with only consensual experiences and victims of verbal coercion were most accepting. Victims of rape and women with only consensual experiences were more accepting of casual sex between acquaintances that were sexually inactive women or women who had experiences unwanted sexual contact. Victims also tended to score lower on a measure of religiosity than women with no sexual experiences. Women with only consensual sexual experiences were lowest in religiosity. On the other hand, victimization status during college did not seem to affect acceptance of male violence towards women.

Turning to indices of interpersonal violence, victims of sexual assault reported higher levels of using and receiving verbal and physical aggression in their romantic relationships.

Finally, the data regarding peer interactions suggest that victims reported a greater number of dating partners than non-victims, and that victims have more sexually active friends and friends who have been sexually victimized than nonvictims.

These results suggest: First year college victimization appears to have an impact in several areas of young women's functioning, even when pre-existing victimizations and level of functioning are controlled for. Women's values and attitudes, sense of self--as reflected in self-image and general psychological well-being, behaviors (use of intoxicants and dating patterns), and knowledge of peer sexual experiences are altered. Furthermore, other analyses indicated that childhood experiences with family violence and sexual abuse contribute to increased psychological distress (i.e., anxiety, depression, loss of control, lack of emotional ties), increased use of intoxicants, a negative self-image, acceptance of male violence, and a tendency to engage in interpersonal physical aggression in dating relationships as an adolescent. Additionally, even when controlling for the impact of early childhood sexual and non-sexual aggression, adolescent sexual victimization is associated with significant increases in psychological distress, negative self-image, involvement in interpersonal aggression, increased use of intoxicants, and higher levels of dating a larger number of different people.

Thus, in the context of early childhood experiences with family violence and sexual abuse, combined with further adolescent sexual victimization, it becomes easier to conclude that some women are at greater risk than others for further sexual victimization as a young adult. Most importantly, the contributors to this vulnerability were factors outside a young woman's control--things that happened to her as a child. As

young girls, they probably learned a presentational style that perpetrators identify as an "easy target." Thus, women who are at risk for victimization are not to be blamed for the vulnerability-enhancing characteristics they possess. Rather, these attributes should serve as an aid in the prevention of further victimization. These results also suggest that the experiences of young girls and adolescents deserve much more research and intervention attention. If we wait till college to begin "date rape prevention" programs, it's too late for significant numbers of young women. The problem of violence against women is a developmental issue that must be addressed early on. Our data suggest that if adolescent victimization can be avoided childhood victimization alone does not increase the risk of assault during the first year in college.

Conclusions

1. **Differences between victims and nonvictims of college sexual assault were found prior to the assault.**

2. **These pre-existing differences were associated with prior victimization experiences occurring in childhood and adolescence, with the adolescent victimization experiences showing a greater impact.**

3. **When prior victimization (childhood and adolescent) and initial differences were controlled for, college victimization still resulted in detrimental effects in major areas of young women's lives. These included**

    a. **psychological well-being**
    b. **self-perceptions**
    c. **attitudes**
    d. **interpersonal functioning**
    e. **peer group**

4. **Therefore, the effects of sexual victimization are cumulative and begin with childhood and adolescent experiences.**

Sexual Victimization Prior to Entering College

Status	Sample Size
No Prior Victimization	276 (50.27%)
Childhood Only	36 (6.56%)
Adolsecent Only	166 (30.24%)
Both	71 (12.93%)
	549 Total

Definitions:

Childhood Victimization: Any sexual contact with an adult or any coercive sexual contact with a peer (based on Finkelhor)

Adolescent Victimization: Any unwanted sexual contact with a male (based on Koss, et al. categories)

Sexual Victimization During First Year of College

Status	Sample Size
No Sexual Contact	142 (25.87%)
Consensual Sex Only	214 (38.98%)
Unwanted Contact	53 (9.65%)
Verbal Coercion	19 (3.5%)
Attempted Rape	68 (12.39%)
Rape	53 (9.65%)